

MINNOW LITERARY MAGAZINE



EDITION 7 : SPRING 2022

Minnow Literary Magazine fishes for minnow-sized literary works and visual creative works that make a big splash. We accept Micro-Poetry (150 words or less), Flash Fiction (500 words or less), Short Personal Essays (1500 words or less), and Visual Art. Nature-themed works are encouraged, but all genres are considered.

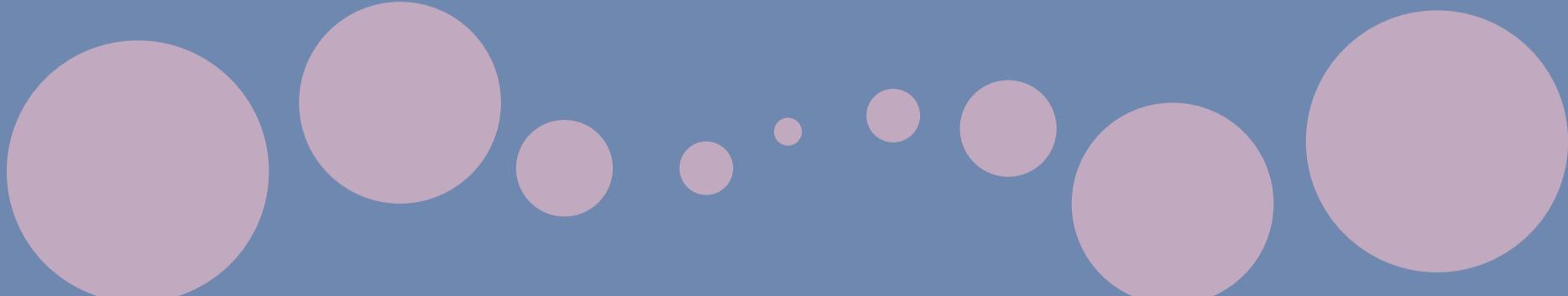
This issue includes works from 6 countries on 5 continents: Australia, Bangladesh, England, New Zealand, Scotland, and the United States (15 different states represented).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Still Life</i> , Mark J. Mitchell.....	1
<i>Her Story Lingers Somewhere</i> , Jennifer Pons.....	2
<i>Sundappled</i> , Sheree Combs.....	3
<i>Opossum</i> , Zach Murphy.....	4
<i>September</i> , Robert Rosenberg.....	6
<i>Walking with a Mistake</i> , Trina Sotira.....	7
<i>Unseasonal</i> , Melody Wilson.....	9
<i>A Gardener Wrestles with Weeds</i> , Ronald J. Pelias.....	10
<i>A Lack of Roots</i> , Alexander Desjardin.....	11
<i>Family of Fungi</i> , Zinetta Hope.....	13
<i>Winter Sun</i> , Lucinda Trew.....	14
<i>The Leaves</i> , Anastasia Myriouni.....	15
<i>Layering</i> , Keith Nunes.....	16
<i>In the Colorado Rockies</i> , John Grey.....	17
<i>Safari</i> , Nancy Buonaccorsi.....	18
<i>Sorting Laundry</i> , Kristy Snedden.....	20
<i>Driftwood</i> , Dave J. Sula.....	21
<i>Swim</i> , Ishrat Jahan.....	22
<i>Under the Wind-Dwarfed Trees</i> , Ursula Shepherd.....	23
<i>Paddling Prayer</i> , Jean Janicke.....	24
<i>Raccoon Hands</i> , Marisa Campbell.....	25
<i>Tiny Centerfold</i> , Gene Twaronite.....	25
<i>Morning Jewel</i> , Inna Malostovker.....	26
<i>Origin Story, at Fourteen</i> , Annette Sisson.....	27
<i>To Boldly Go</i> , Jean Ryan.....	28
<i>Atoms</i> , Jean Ryan.....	31
<i>Elation</i> , Betsy Bolton.....	32
<i>Skipping Stones</i> , Ursula Shepherd.....	33



Still Life
Mark J. Mitchell

Thin fog coats the bay
like breath on a mirror.

The abandoned prison,
some aquarium toy, rises—

a rock with memory of suffering—
doors creak and gulls scream.

You and I perch on hilltops
nursing coffee, talking quietly

about antique goddess worship
and our tidy manuscripts.

Her Story Lingers Somewhere

Jennifer Pons

once, the radio spoke of sand sloughing
into the oceans while wildfires burned
hotter and faster than shooting stars—
she could not kill the bees or fireflies as
they covered her secrets and her silence
with the buzz of hope and pollen

once, she met a priest
that pretended she was a doll
but the ocean loved her like a starfish
so she dove inside its belly
to gaze at the jellyfish twinkling
like heaven above her head

once, during the burn in the back acreage
her lungs collapsed
and the house and goats survived
while the sky opened and tumbled
an offering of jelly-half-orbs to blanket
the land like moons, like sundrops

still, the water never flows fast enough
and the wind is slow to move her



Sheree Combs, *Sundappled*, Photography

Opossum

Zach Murphy

Pete and Richard's orange safety vests glowed a blinding light under the scorching sun, and their sweat dripped onto the pavement as they stood in the middle of the right lane on Highway 61, staring at an opossum lying stiffly on its side.

Richard handed Pete a dirty shovel. "Scoop it up," he said.

Everything made Pete queasy. He once fainted at the sight of a moldy loaf of bread. Even so, he decided to take on a thankless summer job as a roadkill cleaner. At least he didn't have to deal with many people.

Richard nudged Pete. "What are you waiting for?" he asked.

Pete squinted at the creature. "It's not dead," he said. "It's just sleeping."

"Are you sure?" Richard asked as he scratched his beard. He had one of those beards that looked like it would give a chainsaw a difficult time.

"Yes," Pete said. "I just saw it twitch."

Richard walked back toward the shoulder of the road and popped open the driver's side door of a rusty pickup truck. "Alright, let's go."

Pete shook his head. "We can't just leave it here."

"It's not our problem," Richard said. "They tell us what to do with the dead ones but not the ones that are still alive."

Pete crouched down and took a closer look. "We need to get it to safety," he said.

Richard sighed and walked back toward the opossum. "What if it wakes up and attacks us?" he asked. "That thing could have rabies."

"I don't think anything could wake it up right now," Pete said.

Richard belched, "It's an ugly son of a gun, isn't it?"

"I think it's so ugly that it's cute," Pete said.

"No one ever says that about me," Richard said with a chuckle. "I guess I just haven't crossed into that territory."

Just then, a car sped by and swerved over into the next lane. Pete and Richard dashed out of the way.

"People drive like animals!" Richard said. "We'd better get going."

Pete took a deep breath, slipped his gloves on, gently picked up the opossum, and carried it into the woods.

"What are you doing?" Richard asked. "Are you crazy?"

After nestling the possum into a bush, Pete smelled the scent of burning wood. He gazed out into the clearing and noticed a plume of black smoke billowing into the sky. The sparrows scattered away, and the trees stood with their limbs spread, as if they were about to be crucified.

"Jesus Christ," Pete whispered under his breath.

Pete picked up the opossum and turned back around.

September
Robert Rosenberg

Now I cannot trust
the sky, and there is
nowhere else to go.
Bodies spilling out of windows
like confetti, names
becoming smoke, faces
fleeing, caked with ash,
a cruel *kabuki*, we were
forced to watch, we were
made to listen, we of gentler
precincts, we who had forgotten
what it is to howl.

Walking with a Mistake

Trina Sotira

A lone leather boot hangs from a desperate branch, and I look around to find its owner. I imagine scenarios about how it was left and who found it. My own boots are wet, the wool socks inside—even wetter. Water pushes between my toes, and I picture a soldier's gangrene feet.

That same day, my youngest son returned home from his gym with a Marines flag—a prize for the most pull-ups. He emptied his pockets: a Marines key tag, a poster, a slingback bag, a business card for a recruiter. Upon his urging, we hang the red flag behind his bed as a symbol of his strength. I think of PTSD and drills that break a man's soul. Bravery and unbreakable surfaces. I think of camping in the Grand Canyon—my brother-in-law who woke from a sound sleep to light a fire because he heard an animal breathing. His Marine-gut-instinct was right. In the morning, we discovered our tent was on top of an elk bed.

Cold water rinses through my toes as I steer my huskies up a slushy path. A family with holiday smiles wanders out of the nearby woods. The father has a wooden stick to hold his weight, keep his balance. We slow our pace behind the love-at-first-site nature walkers until I finally direct the dogs to turn around. I'm not going to push up on them when the father needs help.

The dogs and I head back toward the boot, and I'm struck with thoughts from yesterday's Christmas tree dismantling: pulling ornaments from eighteen years of children. I still have my ex's crocheted rocking horse, handed down from his mother, and a dangling Swarovski baby carriage. My arthritic thumbs pinched ornament hooks on fake branches to release the memories. On the path, I want to tell the family in the forest that I have family, too. Now, a woman walking alone with her dogs on New Year's Eve. But back then, I wandered the woods and mountains and streams with a love-at-first-sight face.

Seventeen years earlier, I joined my own family through forest cliffs—my first-born dangling from his uncle's chest in a carrier. My anxiety high as tree roots threatened to trip the vessel carrying my child. Between the baby's rage-driven lunch and my husband's soggy

liver, I told my mother-in-law I refused to have more children with her son. Later that week, we were pregnant.

I become used to the pool of water squishing through my socks. I become used to the emptiness I carry and the way walkers look at me. One cheerful couple asks if I know Dan who also has huskies. I can't help but cringe at this stranger who assumes all husky owners know each other. He is clearly on a first date, a common sight during COVID. The outdoorsy online daters always have big smiles. I try to emulate their enthusiasm, but my feet are shriveling. I think of the Tampa woman whose leg was amputated from a post-nail-salon infection. She won over a million in a lawsuit. Nobody is going to pay me for wearing the wrong shoes.

As we head back into the forest—the path toward the car—I think of a phone call eighteen years ago with my aunt as I invited her to my baby shower. There, facing a forest, my aunt shunned the idea of a shower and said her family didn't announce babies until they were born. It was bad luck. Then, she hit me with a family secret buried twenty-six years deep. When my mom was pregnant with me, my aunt tried to convince her to have an abortion. Months after I arrived, my parents divorced.

I don't exactly remember how I responded to my aunt. I recall falling leaves and the cold buzz of rejection. I was a mistake. It's funny how the things we wash away—or try to—stay with us for life. The woods pull family secrets to the surface, bare branches like fishing hooks digging deep.

At home, I push soap across my toes with such force that white curled ribbons shave off the bar. I press suds in the spaces by my nails in hopes that infection escapes. I sink down to the bottom of the tub but am abruptly shaken by a pounding on the door. My youngest, the pull-up champion, needs to shower. It's New Year's Eve, and he must get ready.

Unseasonal Melody Wilson

I didn't divide the bulbs this year,
just left them in their beds
by the back door. Now, home
from December's downpour
to nominate the first decent
Christmas tree we find, I notice
the green teeth of April
poking through the dirt.

First I blush, giddy
—*spring is coming*—
then realize the shoots are early,
as is my hope. These ambitious
daffodils and I, we fritter at cold,
a kind of confusion, like children
lost in a department store,
curled up under the dress rack,
hoping to wake in our own beds,
the calendar flipping by on schedule,
one season at a time.

A Gardener Wrestles with Weeds

Ronald J. Pelias

A gardener knows weeds, how their roots finger their way into the soil, how they claim space in sidewalk cracks, through rock paths, under fence slats, and between plant stems, in places you'd never expect life to grow, how they persist and come uninvited. With layer upon layer of mulch on top of fabric barriers, with chemicals ecologically safe and unsafe, with crowded plots and ground cover, I've tried to stop their return, to kill the unwanted intruders, but nothing ends their insistent presence. I am reduced to the man who kneels to pull out these tenacious life forms, who allows his hands to grab and yank on thin stems for the few days his suburban garden will appear to be in order.



Zinetta Hope, *Family of Fungi*, Photography

Winter Sun
Lucinda Trew

slanting into windows, breaking through opaque clouds
so high-beam bright you almost have to look away,
seek the shade of other seasons—it is otherworldly
scrubbed to a patina tempting you with a balmy promise
that breaks into silvery shards, frost flowers, the perfume
of oleander—leaning in to lure you outside, mittenless
and credulous, a siren call that reminds you of an ex—
trust me, tell me all your secrets, I will keep you warm.

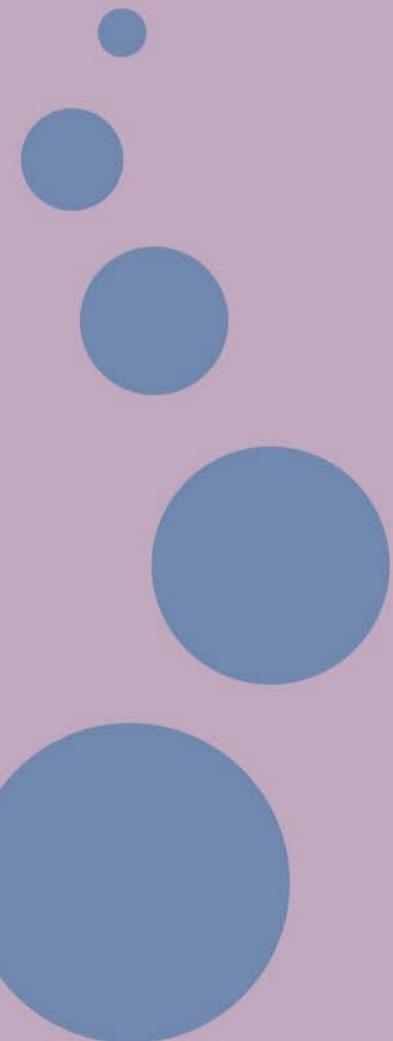
The Leaves

Anastasia Myriouni

At the end of the day
while the birds are asleep
you can hear the trees singing
lovely lullabies to their leaves.

With soft voices and beautiful notes
the leaves are being rocked to sleep
until their eyes are finally closed
and their minds begin to dream.

But my coffee doesn't steam no more
and the air feels thick.
Oh God I would give anything
to be as loved as the leaves.





Keith Nunes, *Layering*, Photography

In the Colorado Rockies
John Grey

Ponderosa pine and alpine fir
cling to mountainsides
like desperate, wind-blown climbers.
For all their effort,
their struggle to reach the top,
they don't make it beyond
the treeline.

Safari

Nancy Buonaccorsi

The pungent smell, rank and raw, coats my nostrils and seeps into my brain before I hear the hyenas and jackals tearing at its flesh, cracking its bones. The Cape Buffalo had been killed by lions early this morning, our safari guide explains as we lean out the open sides of the vehicle, and they have had their fill. The cats have gone to nap in the tall golden grass. Hyenas ruled now. The smaller jackals, wary of their larger relatives, rip at the carcass beside them, sidestep, and take their morsels to a distance. A lone hyena sits apart, watching, som seventy-five feet from the scene. Guarding?

A sentinel? Or was it forced to leave? An outcast. I see its hunched shape, round ears cocked, mouth closed.

We watch and smell and listen. Cameras clicking, then held limp, our eyes, noses, ears fix on the visceral scene. The bulky head of the buffalo, wearing huge stylized gray horns, lays lifeless on the short grass. Ribcage exposed, red flesh. I can hardly believe this is my introduction to the Ngorongoro Crater. The busting of bones, chomping of jaws, the realization that if I lean too far out for that great shot through my lens, the sound of my own bones splintering may be the last I hear. A hyena could easily rip my limbs off my torso for dessert.

We had driven into Ngorongoro Crater that morning. Two thousand feet deep, one hundred square miles, an ancient caldera. Home to zebras, wildebeests, flamingos. Cape buffalo, lions, elephants. Hippos, rhinos, antelope. Grasses, a lake, a myriad of over twenty-five thousand animals. And over five hundred thousand human visitors per year. Surprisingly, there were no other vehicles on the pitted dirt road that ran down a long steep grade into the flat plain. A late start? The rocky, rutty road tossed us about as we toppled down into the wide crater, green and gold and blue, ten miles wide.

We approach, and I'm Katherine Hepburn, scarf billowing in the wind, flying from my neck and shoulders, rifle by my side, scanning the horizon. But, those specks, they aren't wildebeest grazing. Rather, safari vehicles, maybe ten to fifteen, there, in my

savannah wilderness...

We creep forward, another mechanical beast carrying our safari driver, my daughter, our mountain guide, and myself, in the wake of seven days on Mt. Kilimanjaro, now in search of my dream: seeing wild African animals up close. Our vehicle walkie-talkie system crackles with messages. Cape buffalo, being consumed, one hundred yards west. Pride of lions last seen, half a mile north, in tall grass. We head towards the group of humming mechanical intruders near the buffalo, and our driver skillfully, tactfully, squeezes us into position. Tan vehicles, tourists craning out of the open tops, long lenses, cameras clicking. The mechanical beasts are being considerate of each other. Vying for position with respect, careful not to drive off the dirt road, three-point turns to change position without encroaching onto grassland. More photos. Moments of fixed silence. We feel filled. The jackals and hyenas do not. Buzzards wait.

The consumption holds me, follows me. The intense stench of death stays in me for miles when we leave this scene to find another—and find another. A pride of lions lies deep in the dry grass, round ears poking up, the outline of majestic heads floating above the tops of the blades, their bellies full.

We see tire tracks over paw prints, smell diesel mixed with blood, hear the crackling of our radio over the rustling of grass in the wind. Intruders, yes. Yet, our witness, our elemental, primitive, and sophisticated connection to this wildness is crucial. We soak our senses and grasp the imperative for Wild.

The myriad of beasts, the buzzard, jackal, hyena, buffalo, lion, zebra, and on and on and on, live their unrehearsed lives that their marrow instructs, and pull on every corner of the web. Do we feel the tremor? Whether of feathers, fur, scales, claws, toes, tongue, *we are all spun of it*. We squint, see a silver thread, reach a tentative finger, feel a sticky strand, hear the faint vibration, and come face to face with the wondrous spider who designs and constructs it.

The entanglement is eloquent. Intimacy to splintered bones, ripping flesh, and puddled blood essential.

A group of immaculate striped zebras casually walks in front of our departing vehicle. We slow. Their heads bob to their steps. They appear to nod.

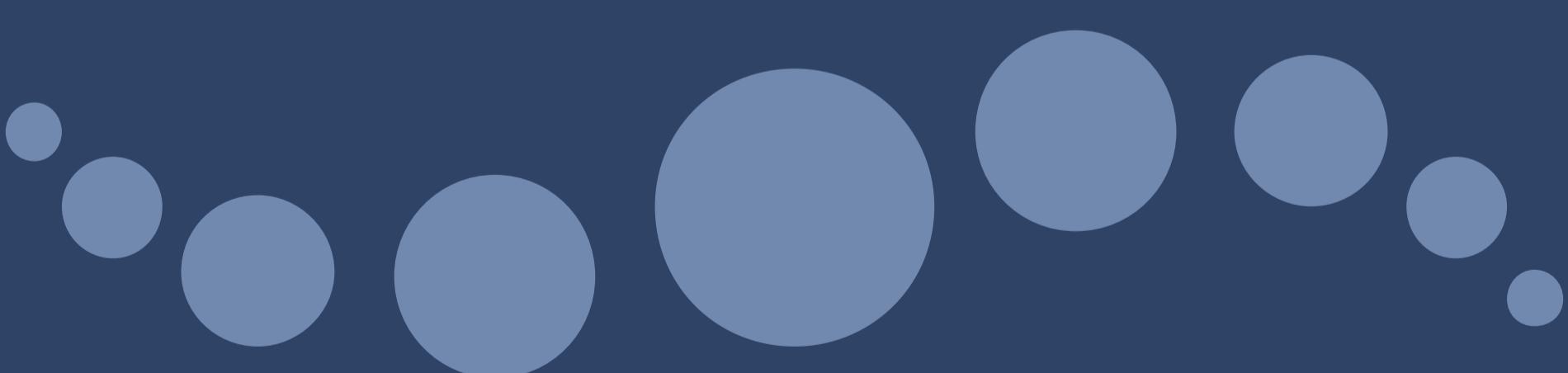
Sorting Laundry

Kristy Snedden

I hid birdsong inside jewels
nestled in the laundry,
warm and neatly folded,
some clothes I didn't recognize,
familiar fragrance, piquant, heady.

Poke bonnet, hoop skirts,
tone-on-tone underskirt. Lumberjack
black and red and the flapper dress.
Feather in a hat, mother's A-line shift,
watermelon dresses, and my faded jeans.

I sent jewels to my daughter,
wrapped inside a poem.
She keeps it in the piano bench
and plays to the wood thrush
on the tree outside her window.





Dave J. Sula, *Driftwood, Photography*

Swim Ishrat Jahan

I used to believe that clear blue skies make for clear, pristine waters—a direct and simple correlation. But the sea is far more complex. Shades of blue, jade, green, and brown mix together around me—colours borrowed from the skies, shore, and the world underneath. I am waist deep in the waters, neither suspended too deep and far off, nor close enough to the shore to let my toes touch any surface.

The soles of my feet, my palms, the back of my shoulders are familiar with the flow of the sea. I taste salt around my lips. The water is warm and soothing on my skin. I have been here for a while. My muscles have learned to play catch and release with the current, wading, floating, swimming.

Swimming.

I must be swimming, for I can let go, but the sea remembers to take care of me. I let the sea do what it pleases; it lends certainty to my otherwise vacant and static mind. At some point this spell will end, and a barrage of thoughts will flood into my head, and I will become someone else. But for now, the sea keeps that burden at bay, and there is relief in this unending continuity.

But I had forgotten about the tides. The waves come in now, a swell of blues, stark white foam building at their edges. They swell, swell, and swell. Taking their time to grow, drawing in breath. They crash, and the world clouds over.

I don't know how to swim.

The sea becomes alien—slimy and prickly. I am pulled in different directions, and the shore is now a thin strip, the promise of ground swallowed by incoming waves. There is only water that has become a uniform, haunting blue.

Clouds have gathered overhead. The only thing the sea says to me now is that there is an urgency. Make a choice, because it already has. It needs to leave, and it needs to change. It is time to either surrender and allow the waves to take me in, or to fight and find land. Let the thoughts flood in and find life.

But I cannot swim.

Where do I go? What do I do?

Is it too late?

Is it too late?

Under the Wind-Dwarfed Trees

Ursula Shepherd

Under the wind-dwarfed trees, hidden like a small child wanting not to be spied upon, I peek between the grasses out to the swell-bent waves.

Waves, rhythmic, steady, steady as they roll; sound wending, patient, broad as the beach they tumble on, waves majestic in their certainty

steady, steady as they roll; the beach open, grey and white, with sun blazing straight across it all.

But here, in damp sand, under the wind-dwarfed trees it is the simple, salt-kissed grasses that frame a widening sky.

It is the upright, tattered greens and yellows, tans and browns that close me in and draw me out to that wide, wide reach of sea.

Paddling Prayer

Jean Janicke

From the bow of a canoe
each dip of the paddle
touches secrets of currents and eddies
in small splashes
over submerged stone.

The universe contracts
to fit between the banks.

Overhead, birds of prey glide and plunge.
Near shore, turtles line up on a log runway.
Dragonflies approach and hover by your paddle.

Between periods of peace,
you kneel for rapids
or, stuck in the shallows,
get out and push.

The current tugs away
from its source.
Each paddle stroke
an illusion of control.

As you approach the shore you hear,
“You don’t need to work so hard.
You’d still get there if you did nothing.”

Raccoon Hands

Marisa Campbell

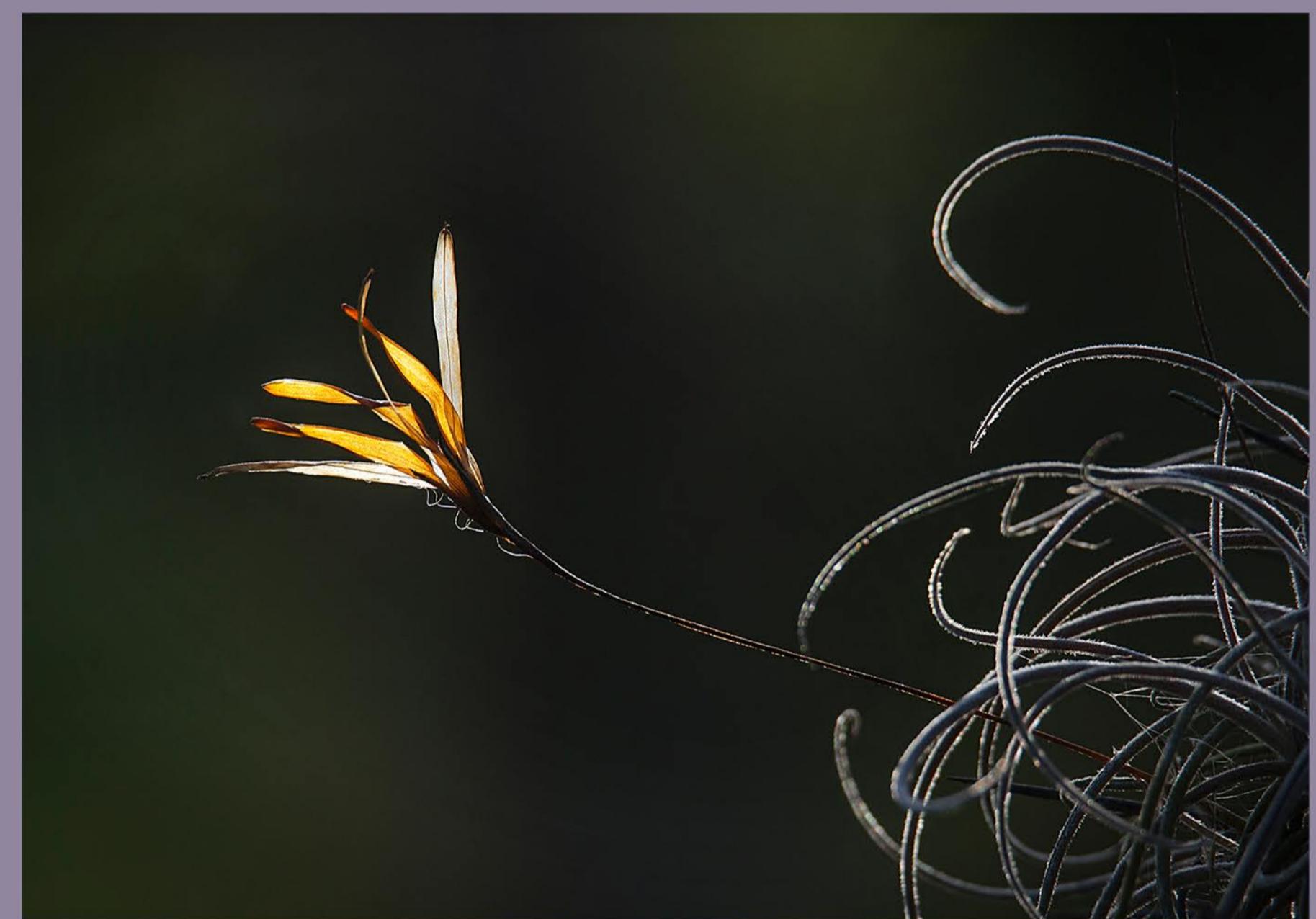
I won't always have these raccoon hands.

I won't always comb
the sunken, reedy parts of you
to find what's good.

Tiny Centerfold

Gene Twaronite

Into the pregnant night the female moth
sends her subtle seductive scent to some
unsuspecting male moth and I wonder what
crazy pictures form in his little brain.



Inna Malostovker, *Morning Jewel*, Photography

Origin Story, at Fourteen Annette Sisson

In the end, we'll all become stories.

Margaret Atwood, *Moral Disorder and Other Stories*

I lie on a frayed quilt in a back acre,
sweep my eyes across the dusky glass—
jeweled studs of stars, nebulae in haze,
silver stippling, a black velvet canvas.

My mind fastens to the vacuum's deep center,
unreels, almost reaches life's nucleus.
Mitochondria spark and spiral; beryl and amber
whirl into green. To still the swirl, I focus

on the blade of a black diamond, realize despair,
ecstasy: the kernel of being, seed of death—
twin chambers of a walnut, like a heart, a pair
of fibrous lungs teetering on the edge of breath.

I see the curve of space and time unfold:
body—spangled sky—the story told.

To Boldly Go

Jean Ryan

Recently I watched a video featuring astronauts. They were trying to express what it feels like to see Earth from space. One astronaut was fascinated by the way he could raise a thumb to the window and block out his home—the oceans, the rain forests, the Sahara, the Alps. Seven continents and eight billion people. Taxes and mortgages, sins and mistakes, secrets and shame. There, gone, there again.

I would never want to do that, hurtle off the planet and soar into space; it is simply too big, too empty. The average distance between stars is twenty million million miles. I am riveted by my own backyard and the wonders that await me each day. Butterflies emerging from hardened husks, the intricate architecture of lime green katydids, twenty-pound watermelons coaxed from half-inch seeds.

Nor do I have the mettle required to pit my warm beating heart against the frigid reaches of space. I thought it was odd that none of the astronauts used the word “panic” in describing the sight of Earth through a porthole. A single glitch and their space ship could become space junk. They must not reflect on that; their minds, like their bodies, must be in excellent shape.

My father was a NASA scientist who developed several of the tests performed on would-be astronauts to determine their space-worthiness. In particular, he studied the effects of weightlessness on the human body. In 1960, he spent a week floating in a water tank in a rubber suit. Urine tests showed that his body began steadily disposing unneeded muscle and bone. The research provided proof that astronauts on long-duration flights would need to engage in rigorous exercise to prevent physical decline.

The International Space Station is a technological masterpiece, the pinnacle of human enterprise, a status at odds with its lifestyle limitations. There's not much glamour in strapping oneself into a bunk each night or squeezing dinner from a plastic pouch. Beyond these character-building exercises, there is the physical toll. Without gravity, fluids in the body travel upward, resulting in headaches, nausea, and a constant feeling of pressure. The heart, veins, and arteries weaken, as do the muscles. Crew members need to exercise at least two hours a day on specialized equipment or lose what they may not regain, like bone. High carbon dioxide levels, needed for optimal equipment performance, make their eyes burn. Bathroom breaks are probably the most

challenging aspect of cosmic living. Astronauts must hover over a nineteen-million-dollar potty—it resembles a wet-vac—and, in zero gravity, send their feces into a tiny lining at the top; accidents are not uncommon. Since space toilets are not emptied every day, someone is obliged to don a rubber glove as needed and pack the poo down. When critical mass is achieved, the problem is shot into space and burns up in Earth's atmosphere.

While viewing Earth from an alien's perspective may be the highest privilege we can accord our own, I imagine there must be a fair amount of grumpiness and boredom inside the space station. With no doors to close, privacy is out of the question. There are no spouses to hug, no children to adore, no puppies to pet, or flowers to plant. There is only that haunting view of Planet Earth and a hamster wheel of daily tasks: cleaning filters, checking support systems, updating equipment, and collecting data on themselves and the endless darkness around them.

More than one astronaut on the program I watched mentioned how organic the world appears, a blue ball of ever-flowing energy, with swirling storms and flashes of lightning. They spoke of the planet's stunning fragility, the "paper-thin" layer of atmosphere barely hugging the surface, our only protection from cosmic destruction. There was footage of the damage we've done, the scars and erosions and clear-cutting startlingly evident from the clarity of space.

Out there, the sun is not the sun as we know it, not the dependable orb that gloriously rises and sets, but just a star, one of billions. That this particular star happens to keep us alive, held in breathtaking orbit, at precisely the right distance and angle to maintain myriad forms of life, is an imponderable bit of luck.

The cosmos stretches in all directions, swallowing space and time. To be there in that black forever is to see infinity. And to see the earth from this otherworldly place is to see its plight. There it somehow is, the blue planet, our only home in the universe. One of the astronauts used the term "Spaceship Earth," because that is how he sees us, a vast crew with one destiny. Scientists call this perception of oneness the "overview effect." It does not dawn on you gradually, the astronauts said. It is an immediate and ecstatic revelation: We Are One.

Despite their training and valor, astronauts must feel relief, at least at first, when they are safely back on *terra firma*. Above them is the sky and sun and moon, each where it should be. And here is that old friend gravity keeping everything in place. When they walk, I wonder if they feel the pull of the earth. Does the weight of their duffle bags surprise them? Some of these travelers have been aloft for several months. Do

their wrinkles appear all at once? Did their skin age more or less? What are they most ravenous for? Sex? A grilled steak? A queen-size bed?

But what I really want to know is how they manage later, when they are fully restored and back in their Nikes and Nissans. What do they think of war, the stock market, hair loss, teeth whitening? Do they miss that lightness of being when they were floating free of earthly burdens? When they gaze into the night sky, does it beckon them back? Having seen the big picture, are they lonely among us?

Atoms

Jean Ryan

Cells die, but not the hundred trillion atoms
within each one—they've been around
since the stars were born and will be here ever after.
Even a body gone up in smoke
does not lose a single atom.
Skin, blood, and bones turn to
water, gas, and minerals.
So widely are atoms recycled
that a billion of our own
once belonged to Shakespeare.

Knowing this helps.
Now that you are gone,
you could be anywhere:
inside a red maple leaf
or the twitching tail of a tadpole,
in the taste of a honeydew melon,
in the sigh of a thousand strangers,
in the hollow you left within my arms.

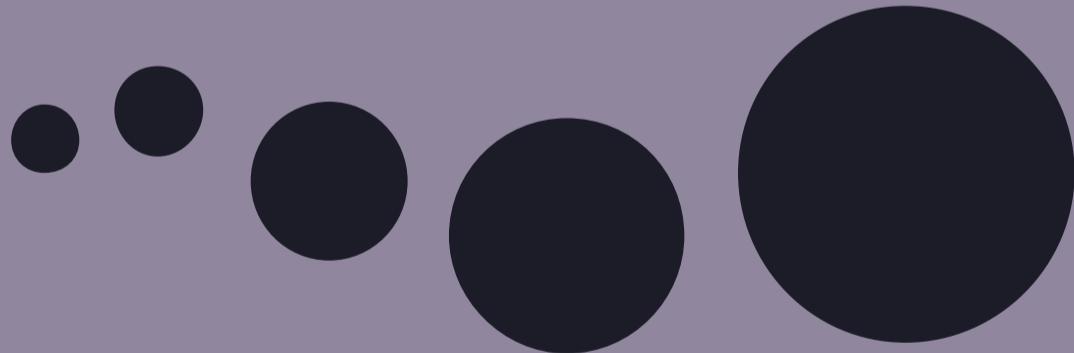
Elation
Betsy Bolton

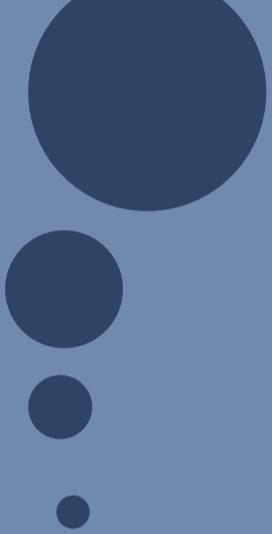
My highest flight: tandem paragliding with a young guide keen to share his love of wind and sky. Together, we stepped off the mountainside, skimmed the trees, rode up the slope to the ridge on air currents deflected from ground and trees. We caught a thermal, circled higher. The world dropped away down the far side of that ridge, seeming to double our speed. Heart rising, stomach dropping into the wind. Terror entwined with spasming delight, disbelief that the thinning air could still support us, twisting, on edge, amid the spinning clouds.

Skipping Stones

Ursula Shepherd

It's all the same, you know
this thing called art—
music
painting
writing—
all build and bloom
and skip across the page
demanding to
be birthed
into a wider sea.





be more than a drop in the ocean

SPRING 2022